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NEW WEB SITE HELPS HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS IDENTIFY AND TREAT WOMEN WITH PERINATAL DEPRESSION

(RICHMOND, Va.)—Health care professionals have a new tool to learn how to identify, treat or refer women suffering from perinatal depression, the most common complication of pregnancy. The Virginia Department of Health (VDH), in collaboration with the University of Virginia (UVA) Office of Continuing Medical Education, recently launched a new Web site www.perinataldepression.org. Health care providers can log on to earn continuing education credit through the UVA School of Medicine for completing the perinatal depression curriculum, which is being offered free of charge for at least the next year.

Perinatal depression encompasses a wide range of physical, emotional and mood disorders that can occur during and up to one year after pregnancy. Many women get the blues after having a baby. But when the "down" times are long lasting or interfere with a woman's ability to function, she may be suffering from this common but serious illness. Major symptoms of perinatal depression include depressed mood, decreased energy, feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt, and recurring thoughts of death or suicide.

VDH estimates that 10 percent to 15 percent of new mothers, or 9,000 to 14,000 women in Virginia, experience perinatal depression. When undiagnosed and untreated, perinatal depression can be extremely detrimental to women, their infants and their families.

"The curriculum on the new Web site will help health care providers in Virginia and the nation gain the knowledge and skills they need to alleviate depression among pregnant women and new mothers," said State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. "Providers need to understand the important role they play in the lives of women and their families, and that depression can be successfully treated."

A survey of physicians, nurses and social workers conducted by VDH last spring found that more than half of those surveyed lacked confidence in their knowledge and skills to diagnose and treat depression. The Web-based training gives providers, including physicians, nurses, social workers, pharmacists and dieticians, the most up-to-date information on perinatal depression, such as medications appropriate for pregnant and nursing women, in an engaging interactive format.

The Web site is the product of The 3 Ps of Perinatal Depression: Perinatal Health, Provider Education and Public Awareness, which is funded by a \$250,000 grant from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration. Under the direction of the VDH Division of Women's and Infant's Health, the Web site was developed by the UVA Office of Continuing Medical Education and Scitent, a software technology company in Charlottesville. It was aided by a 50-member expert panel of public and private providers, state agencies and consumers who provided advice on the content of the curriculum. The panel also identified ways to enhance the quality of perinatal mental health services and increase the ability of the health care system to recognize and treat perinatal patients.

In addition to VDH's new Web site, www.perinataldepression.org, information about perinatal depression can be found at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Web site www.4women.gov/faq/postpartum.htm.